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List 6

**Osterley Park House**
Osterley, Middlesex

# Early Neo-Classical Furniture in Britain 1755-80

6 September to
19 November 1972

**Osterley Park House, Osterley, Middlesex**

**EARLY NEO-CLASSICAL FURNITURE IN BRITAIN 1755-80**

**6 September to 19 November 1972 Weekdays 10-6 Sundays 2-6**
**Admission 20p Children under 16 and old age pensioners 10p**

*An exhibition staged by the Victoria & Albert Museum, with the aid of the Arts Council, to coincide with the main Council of Europe exhibition of Neo-Classical Art being held in London during the Autumn of 1972.*

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The exhibition is in two parts.

1. **Bays A-D** inclusive are devoted to a survey of the early development of Neo-Classicism in furniture and furnishings in this country. This summarises the present state of knowledge in this field which is being energetically explored by numerous scholars at present. It is in a sense a report of work in progress and many questions remain posed – and unanswered.

2. **Bay E** is devoted to a pictorial analysis of the interior decoration and furnishings in each of the principal rooms at Osterley Park. The rooms themselves are of course open as well, so the actual details may be studied in conjunction with this exhibit.

Although the exhibition is to a large extent self-explanatory, the visitor may find a few general remarks helpful.
A great deal of thought has been given during the past few months to the question of what actually consitutes Neo-Classicism, and the organisers of this particular exhibition have introduced several exhibits to demonstrate how very difficult it is to define this concept at all clearly. It must be remembered that no one in the 1750's stood up and said "We will now create a Neo-Classical Style", and it was only with hind-sight that men like Robert Adam were subsequently able to claim that a new style had in fact been created in the period 1755 to 1770.

It is often said that the Neo-Classical Style was new because architects and designers now began to draw inspiration directly from the monuments of Classical Antiquity, but their predecessors in the Renaissance and Baroque periods had also studied these monuments and had access to suites of engravings of them. The Academy of Architecture in Paris sent its best pupils to study in Rome, and the more ambitious English architects, William Kent for example, made similar visits to the Classical capital in the 17th or early 18th century. Moreover, the clients of such architects frequently went on the Grand Tour and became familiar themselves with the remains of the Classical Age. Classical forms and motifs were therefore not strange to architects and their clients before the Neo-Classical revival was launched in the third quarter of the 18th century.

In France, in the middle of the century, there was a strong reaction against the informal and often absurd confections of the Rococo phase, and the contrast between these and the creations of those who advocated a revision of taste were quite obvious. However, even these partisan revisionists consciously sought their inspiration at least as much from the Classical tradition familiar to all as from their own direct studies of Classical monuments, made while they were being trained in Rome. They looked back to the Great Age of Louis XIV and the Classicism embodied in the teachings of the French Academy, so that the style they now created was a renewal as much as an innovation based on a thumbing through of their own sketch-books.

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In England the situation was even less clear-cut, for here the Neo-Classical phase was preceded by that of Neo-Palladianism which was nothing if not a classical style, based as it was on the teachings of the Roman architect Vitruvius, as interpreted by the 16th century Italian architect, Palladio. So British architects were busy erecting Classical buildings and interiors at a time when the rest of Europe had eagerly espoused the Rococo style! The Rococo certainly enjoyed some favour in this country as well, but was never adopted so whole-heartedly that it gave rise to a strong reaction – as it did in France.

All the same, fresh inspiration became available in the 1750's as three architects who were to become important returned from periods of study abroad. They were James "Athenian" Stuart, who returned in 1755 from a stay in Italy and from making a survey of the Classical monuments of Athens; William Chambers, who had also spent some years in Italy but had in addition attended Blondel's *Ecole des Arts* in Paris and returned to England in the same year as Stuart; and Robert Adam who had likewise made an extensive study of Classical ornament in Rome and elsewhere, and returned in 1758. These architects introduced much that was new but they were children of their time and had all been brought up in the Palladian tradition.

What is more important, from our point of view, is that they had all come in contact, while in Rome, with some of the young French architects who were to become the principal advocates of a new style on their return to France. Chambers remained a close friend and correspondent of several of these men, and the three British architects must all have been familiar with the theories that pervaded French architectural thinking during this phase or will have known of the chief developments that were taking place in the French capital. The development of Neo-Classicism in Britain, as established principally by these three men, was remarkably similar – both in style and timing – to that which took place in France.

Each of these three architects discovered, as did their counterparts in France, that it would be necessary to devise furniture and furnishings that suited the interiors they were decorating in a novel manner and this exhibition surveys their efforts in this direction. The furniture designed in the new taste at a very early date by James Stuart was of so uncompromising a character that it won no widespread acceptance. William Chambers advocated a far less extreme form although his role was probably more seminal than direct, as far as furniture was concerned. While certainly a confirmed Classicist, he drew heavily on the Baroque and Neo-Palladian repertoire of ornament. Robert Adam at first merely required the furniture in the rooms he designed to be decorated with a few Classical motifs, but by the mid-1760's, was designing fully "Neo-Classical" furniture and probably did more than any other British architect to forge a new style in the field of furniture.

By the time James Wyatt returned to England in 1768, Adam had already established a style that was being eagerly accepted; and he found it necessary to adopt this style as a general basis for his own compositions. Several other architects and a host of designers of ornament quickly learned to work in the new style. The principal firms of upholsterers and cabinet-makers worked closely with the architects and helped to evolve the style; indeed, most of them had considerable design-facilities of their own. Certain manufacturers, notably Matthew Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood, sought inspiration from the published engravings of Classical monuments and sometimes direct from the architects themselves; in the present context, this was of importance when they set about producing metalwork and ceramic wares specially suited to Neo-Classical interiors.

All these matters are touched upon in the various displays in this exhibition but it needs to be stressed that there is still much uncertainty about many points and it is not yet by any means possible to make definite pronouncements about them.

The chief displays in each Bay are as follows:

**Bay A**

The Society of Dilettanti
Neo-Palladian or Neo-Classical?
James Stuart at Kedleston
James Stuart at Spencer House
The Neo-Classical Tripod

**Bay B**

William Chambers; his contacts with France
The State Coach and the Kedleston Sofas
Matthew Boulton's ormolu
Chambers' early furniture
Chambers' later furniture

*Note* This section of the Long Gallery has been left exposed to show the recent re-decoration. The room was designed by Chambers within an Elizabethan shell, and modified by Adam.

**Bay C**

Robert Adam's early furniture
Adam at Audley End
The Oval Chair-back
James Wyatt's furniture designs
Wyatt at Heveningham
Ornamental vases

**Bay D**

The work of various cabinet-makers in the new style:

1. Chippendale
2. Ince & Mayhew
3. James Cullen
4. John Cobb
5. Georg Haupt and Christopher Fürloh

Matthias Lock
Bartolozzi, Pergolesi, Cipriani and Zucchi
Wedgwood's early Classicism
Decorative Wedgwood plaques
Neo-Classical ornamental silver

**Bay E**

This is given over entirely to an analysis of the decoration and furnishing of the individual rooms at Osterley, room by room. Details are shown, sources revealed, and comparisons made.

Osterley is remarkable because so much of the original furniture survives from the period of Robert Adam's radical re-decoration of the house in the 1760's and 1770's. An inventory of 1782, taken when the task was complete, makes it possible to establish exactly which pieces were in a particular room and one can therefore study in this house very clearly how a great programme of Neo-Classical ornament – which such a house constitutes – was built up. Each detail had significance for the initiated visitor of the time and each detail was consciously designed to contribute to the essential character of the room concerned. As Adam himself said, "In 2000 years one should be able to judge the purpose of a room from a small fragment".

The rooms on the Principal Floor in this house were State Rooms that were mainly for show (the exceptions being the Breakfast Room and Library which, although impressive, also served practical purposes). They were intended to impress the visitor and to serve as backgrounds for large gatherings of people who were keen to show off their finery and to inspect that of the rest of the company. Adam had been forced to fit his rooms into the shell of the existing Elizabethan house but managed to establish the traditional sequence of rooms in at any rate the South Wing. Thus one progresses from the Gallery through the magnificent Drawing Room ("fit for Eve before the Fall" as Horace Walpole put it), and on through the astonishing Ante-Chamber, with its Gobelins tapestry-hangings, to the State Bedchamber where stood the ultimate symbol of rank, wealth or pretensions – the State Bed! Beyond, is a Dressing Room that was decorated in the latest, ultra-fashionable manner – in the "Etruscan Taste"; a novel style, for the introduction of which Adam was apparently solely responsible.

A writer in 1796 was not exaggerating when he claimed of Osterley that "the apartments, which are numerous and of large dimensions, are enriched with a various profusion of the most sumptuous embellishments and superb furniture". It is hoped that this last section of our exhibition will draw fresh attention to the "sumptuous embellishments" while the rooms themselves will bear witness to the skill with which Adam has attended to the decoration *as a whole*. The furniture, which is indeed "superb", has been carefully placed in what we believe are the actual positions for which it was designed so as to contribute to the total conception – to form, as it were, part of the architecture.

In preparing this exhibition, we have been helped by a large number of people to all of whom we are sincerely grateful. I would especially like to thank Mr. Nicholas Goodison for drafting the labels concerning Matthew Boulton. We have also had the great benefit of the advice of Mrs. Peter Fergusson, Dr. Ivan Hall, Mr. John Harris, Mr. and Mrs. John Hayward and Mr. David Udy, and of our colleagues Mrs. Shirley Bury and Mr. John Mallet. The main burden of the work has fallen on my colleagues, Mr. Maurice Tomlin and Mr. John Hardy, to both of whom I am, as always, much indebted.

*Peter Thornton, Keeper*
*Department of Furniture and Woodwork, Victoria & Albert Museum*

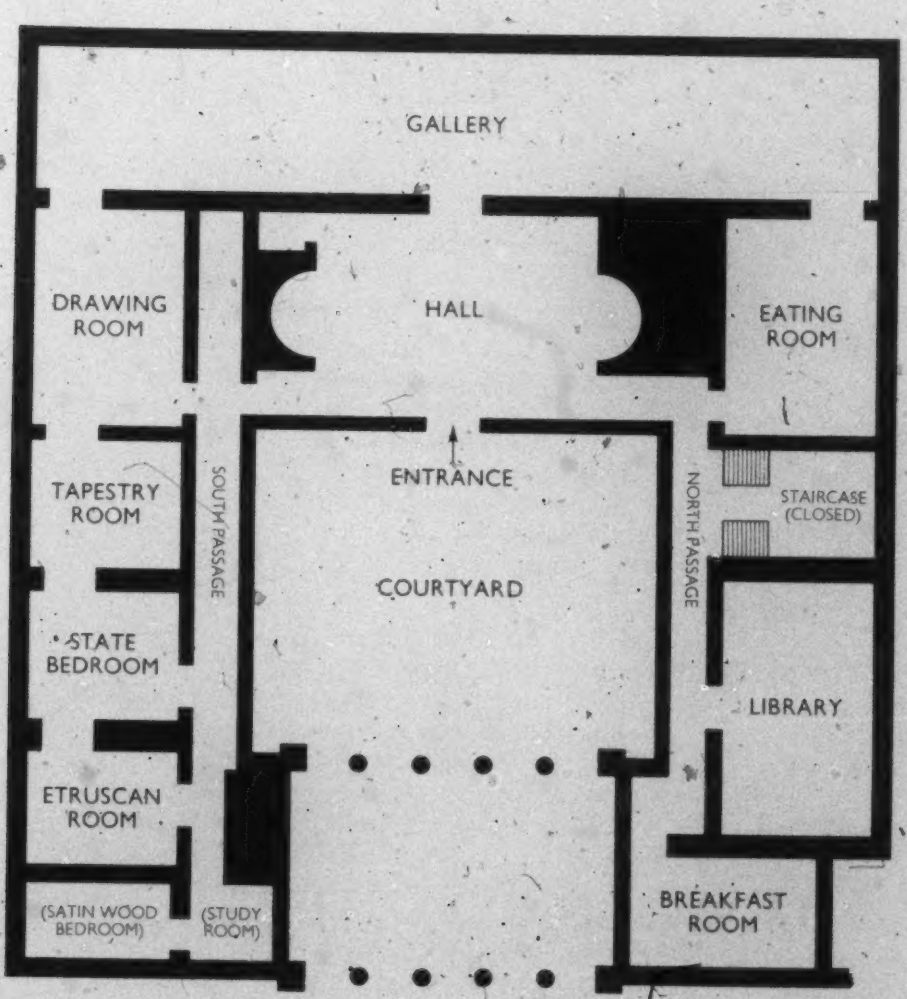
**Public Transport to Osterley Park House:**

Underground to Osterley Station on the Piccadilly Line; buses Nos. 91 and 116; Green Line coaches Nos. 704 and 705. After alighting from train or bus at Osterley Station, which is on the Great West Road, turn north up Thornbury Road (traffic lights) and enter Osterley Park by the gate in Jersey Road. A car park is available inside the grounds.

Osterley Park is also a short taxi ride from Heathrow Airport.

**Plan of Principal Floor: Osterley Park House.**

The exhibition of Neo-Classical Furniture is contained in the Gallery, and begins at the door leading from the Eating Room.

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